Virginia Strategic Planning for Statewide Interoperability

Focus Group 1

Wytheville, VA
April 7, 2004
Follow Up Report

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Introduction

The Governor of Virginia has recognized the need to address interoperability in communities throughout the Commonwealth and has charged the Office of Public Safety to design a strategic plan for statewide interoperability. The involvement of local and statewide emergency responders is essential to the success of developing a Statewide Interoperability Strategic Plan.

In order to develop a collaborative Statewide Interoperability Strategic Plan, the Office of Public Safety will be conducting six (6) focus group sessions, comprised mainly of informal and formal leaders from fire, law enforcement, and Emergency Medical Services (EMS) departments. Additional representation will include public health, local and state agencies in order to accurately capture local perspectives on the state of interoperability communications in Virginia.

The outcomes and purpose of the focus group sessions are as follows:
- ❑ Capture of local emergency responder perspectives on interoperable communications
- ❑ Shared understanding of interoperability issues specific to each region of VA
- ❑ Education and shared awareness of interoperability issues across stakeholder groups
- ❑ Attention paid to emergency responder commonalities as opposed to differences

Each focus group session is designed as a series of conversations centered on the following: interoperability, statewide and regional, as it relates to the current state, the case for why change needs to happen, the envisioned future state, recommended strategies to pursue, and barriers to achieving the future state.

Executive Summary

The Southwest Virginia focus group session on April 7th, 2004 provided valuable input from the local perspective for the development of the Statewide Interoperability Strategic Plan. The focus group identified the following four (4) major initiatives to be considered during the strategic planning session on May 18th: 1) Establish one (1) programmable radio; 2)

Establish seven (7) Regional Interoperability Communications Coordinators; 3) Mandate one (1) unified code: Clear Text; and 4) Implement a public awareness strategy.

Detailed Overview

Current State

The objective of the Current State is to state the facts and identify the problems related to interoperability in day-to-day activities, mutual aid, and task force efforts.

The Southwest focus group identified the following Current State themes:
- Mutual Aid channels are not being used because local responders are not aware of the channels or are not trained to how to use the channels
- Multiple code systems for radio dialog: 10 Code versus Clear Text
- Ineffective and inefficient purchasing results in high costs for agencies to maintain numerous radio systems
- Outdated technology: antiquated radios
    Example: State Police radios were purchases in the 1970s and 1980s
- Inability to communicate with other jurisdictions
    Example: Weber City, in Scott County, is not able to communicate with surrounding jurisdictions
- Geographic challenges with portable radios
    Example: in the Southwest region mountainous terrain and line of sight impacts communications

Case for Change

The objective of the Case for Change conversation is to discuss the consequences and implications if changes to Virginia's interoperable

communications did not occur. The Case for Change statements should appeal to the emotions of individuals and result in action.

The Southwest focus group identified the following Case for Change:
➢ There are different threats in the world than 3 years ago
➢ We are responsible for protecting our citizens and communities
➢ One cohesive response will result in more efficient emergency management
➢ Economies of Scale: Reduction in maintenance costs, Eliminate duplication
➢ Deterrents through preparedness

Future State
The objective of the Future State conversation is to discuss what interoperability in Virginia should be.

The Southwest focus group highlighted the following elements of the Future State of interoperable communications in Virginia:
➢ One portable programmable device to access all frequencies
➢ Centralized Business: buying, maintenance, distribution, training, Clear Text
➢ Statewide coverage for all agencies
➢ Systematic Approach: uniformity in work
➢ Fair and Reasonable funding based on multiple criteria

Barriers
The purpose of the Barriers conversation is to identify factors hindering the effort to achieve the Future State.

The Southwest team identified the following barriers:
➢ Political agendas and turf battles
➢ Lack of resources: funding and human
➢ Lack of follow though/communication to the local level
➢ Technical complications associated with proposal designs

<u>Strategy</u>

The purpose of the Strategy conversation is to identify the fundamental strategic initiatives essential to successful implement a statewide interoperability plan in Virginia.

The Southwest team identified the following critical initiatives in achieving interoperability communications statewide:

(1)   Purchasing one programmable radio system: regional implementation to showcase success before implementing statewide

(2)   Creating 7 (7) regional interoperability communication coordinators: ensure local support and statewide collaboration

(3)   Mandating a unified language: Clear Text

(4)   Implementing a communications strategy: education and public awareness

Next Steps

The outcomes from the six (6) regional focus group sessions will drive the strategic planning session and the key initiatives that will be identified as the cornerstones of the Statewide Interoperability Strategic Plan. The strategic planning session is scheduled to take place in Richmond, Virginia on May 18, 2004.

There is a strong commitment to maintain the communication flow between the Office of Public Safety and the participants of each focus group as the planning for statewide interoperability in Virginia progresses. A report detailing the results of the Southwest Virginia focus group meeting will be distributed to the participants by Monday April 11, 2004. Additional data on the STARS system will be shared with the Southwest focus group team as the contract agreement materializes. In addition, the results of the conversations with all six (6) focus groups will be distributed to all participants by early May.

When asked what the Southwest team could commit to do differently today to improve interoperability in their region, the group committed to three (3) action items:

(1)   Steve Counts, with the Virginia Department of Forestry (VDOF), will request VDOF to add the existing statewide mutual aid frequency to the VDOF radios and report back to the Office of Public Safety within 10 days the success of this request.

(2)   Steve White and Morris Reese will provide information through the EMS agencies in two regions the auspices of the Southwest Regional EMS Council and the Western Regional EMS Council. This effort will educate EMS users to understand interoperability and assist in championing the Commonwealth's effort to develop a strategic plan for interoperability in Virginia.

(3)   Within the next 90 days, Gunnar Kohlbeck will ensure seven (7) ICR units are operational in each field area.

Participants of the April 7, 2004 focus group meeting, in Wytheville, Virginia, on VA Strategic Planning for Statewide Interoperability:

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